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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

THE LETTERS OF WILLIAM JAMES¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

“ARDENTLY adventurous and humane”: that is the singularly happy phrase which the son of William James has hit upon to characterize the genius of his incomparable father. It would be difficult to give in four words a more accurate and comprehensive estimate of that irresistible personality. For thirty-five years the mind of William James irradiated the intellectual life of such Americans as were exposed to its contagion between the last of the 'seventies and the tenth year of the new century, when his swift and luminous spirit set forth to explore those environs of the actual in whose reality he believed more strongly as he grew older, because (as he said a few years before his death) he “was just getting fit to live.” No one was ever more completely deficient in rigidity or self-consciousness than William James. That is a delicious conveyance of the sense of him which Dickenson Miller gives in a recollection published with the Letters: a scene at one of James' classes when, to illustrate a point, he brought out a blackboard. “He stood it on a chair and in various positions, but could not at once write upon it, hold it steady, and keep it in the class's vision. Entirely bent on what he was doing, his efforts resulted at last in his standing it on the floor while he lay at full length, holding it with one hand, drawing with the other, and continuing the flow of his commentary.” And Dr. Miller remembers him, at the end of a crowded lecture on Pragmatism at the Horace Mann Auditorium in New York, when, assailed with questions by people who came up to the edge of the platform, he ended by sitting on that edge himself, “in his frock coat as he was, his feet hanging down, with his usual complete absorption in the sub-

¹ *The Letters of William James.* Edited by his son, Henry James. In Two Volumes. Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press,

ject, and the look of human and mellow consideration which distinguished him at such moments, meeting the thoughts of his inquirers. If this suggests a lack of dignity, it misleads, for dignity never forsook him, such was the inherent strength of tone and hearing." Imagine this vivid, salty, untrammelled being irrupting into the Cambridge—into the Eastern United States—of the 'seventies: into that airless and sterile day which he was so effectually to transform! What a *milieu* to break into! You think of that "sad and spectral" thing described by the elder Henry James, ferocious and brilliant sire of the delectable Pragmatist and of the marvellous old spider of Lamb House, Rye—a page of social and intellectual history "composed by skeletons and intended for readers who are content to disown their good flesh and blood, and be moved by some ghastly mechanism . . . where nothing more musical is heard than the occasional jostling of bone by bone."

Where, you wonder, did William James set bounds to his receptiveness, his voracious intellectual hospitality, his incredible gusto?—except when he found himself confronting the contracted and the disingenuous. He loved Emerson—"the divine Emerson," Emerson "the incorruptible, the exquisite"; and in the same letter he extolled his beloved H. H. [Henry Higginson], "as liberal-hearted a man as the Lord ever walloped entrails into." His phobias were significant: the pious jingoism of Kipling: the "sniveling cant" of the Anglo-Saxon race with its talk of its "burden" . . . "we're the most loathsomely canting crew that God ever made. Kipling knows perfectly well that our camps in the tropics are not college settlements or our armies bands of philanthropists, slumming it; and I think it is a shame that he should represent us to ourselves in that light. I wish he would try a bit interpreting the savage soul to us, as he could [*could* he?], instead of using such official and conventional phrases as 'half-devil and half-child,' which leaves the whole insides out." He loathed almost as whole-heartedly certain aspects of the American panorama—"the sight of my fellow-beings in hotels and dining-cars having their boiled eggs brought to them, broken by a negro, two in a cup, and eaten with butter." Also "the vocalization of our countrymen," which he found

“incredibly loathsome”—“so ignobly awful that the process of hardening oneself thereto is very slow”; also “the *banalité* of our Eastern cities.” Nor was there room at his hearthstone for “Imperialism” (the Imperialism of 1899), which was bound up for him with the pious chatter of those days about “benevolent assimilation” and with “the cold pot-grease of McKinley’s eloquence.” He could not tolerate an inferiority of aesthetic skill—“there’s nothing in the world so despicable as a bad artist,” he wrote in 1860. But a generation later “the admirable precision and adequacy” of the art of de Maupassant left him unmoved: for an odd recrudescence in him of Puritan shrinking had turned him against what he viewed as the “dirty water” thrown by de Maupassant’s “admirably compact and powerful little metallic pump,” and he confessed to a preference for “an old shaky wooden pump-handle if the water it fetches only carries all the sweetness of the mountain side.” It sounds a little like Dr. Frank Crane. But that was in 1888. Less than a decade later he was absorbing *Anna Karenina* with delight in “its almost incredible and supernatural veracity.”

It is a measure of his spiritual hardiness and his incorrigible, undaunted, undiminishable humor that he could undertake and survive an experience at Chautauqua. One has only to attempt a picture of his brother Henry confronting Chautauqua, and surviving it, to achieve an instant perception of the triumphant blend of sensibility and robustness that at once nourished and armored the soul of William James.

“I’ve been meeting minds,” he wrote from Chautauqua in 1896, “so earnest and helpless that it takes them half an hour to get from one idea to its immediately adjacent next neighbor and that with infinite creaking and groaning. And when they’ve got to the next idea they lie down on it with their whole weight and can get no farther, like a cow on a doormat, so that you can get neither in nor out with them.” And again: “’Tis the Sabbath, and I’m just in from the amphitheatre, where the Rev. — has been chanting, calling, and bellowing his hour-and-a-quarter-long sermon to 6000 people at least—a sad audition. . . . I breakfasted with a Methodist parson with 32 false teeth, at the X’s table, and discoursed of demoniacal possession.

The wife said she had my portrait in her bedroom with the words written under it, 'I want to bring a balm to human lives'!!!! Supposed to be a quotation from me!!! After breakfast an extremely interesting lady who has suffered from half-possessional insanity gave me a long account of her case. Life *is* heroic, indeed, as Henry wrote. . . . The Chautauqua week has been a real success. I have learned a lot, but I'm glad to get into something less blameless . . . the flash of a pistol, a dagger, a devilish eye, anything to break the unlovely level of 10,000 good people—a crime, murder, rape, elopement, anything would do. . . . I long to escape from tepidity. Even an Armenian massacre, whether to be killer or killed, would seem an agreeable change from the blamelessness of Chautauqua as she lies soaking year after year in her lakeside sun and showers. . . . I have seen more women and less beauty, heard more voices and less sweetness, perceived more earnestness and less triumph, than I ever supposed possible. Most of the American nation (and probably all nations) is white-trash." Yet when James turned from the naïve Puritanism of middle-class America to the spectacle of Anglicanism flourishing on its native heath, he was no less caustically perceptive: "Not until those weeks at Oxford, and these days at Durham," he wrote to a friend at home two years before his death, "have I had any sense of what a part the Church plays in the national life—so massive and all pervasive, so authoritative, and on the whole so decent, in spite of the iniquity and farcicality of the whole thing. . . . Anglicanism remains obese and round and comfortable . . . without an *acute* note in its whole history, in spite of the shrill Jewish words on which its ears are fed, and the nitroglycerine of the Gospels and epistles which has been injected into its veins."

But James was too hardily resistant to the contagion of formulas to dogmatize about national characteristics; that futile and unrewarding occupation seemed to him both crude and childish—"international judgments and passings of sentence," he called it impatiently. "Every nation," he wrote to Mrs. Whitman from England, "has ideals and difficulties and sentiments which are an impenetrable secret to one not of the blood. Let

them alone, let each one work out its own salvation on its own lines." Nietzsche said of Wagner's music that he hated it, but could no longer endure any other. William James savored and loved and endured all Varieties of National Experience (as he might have written of them): but he could say as late as 1899, even while watching his native land "perversely rushing to wallow in the mire of" the sanctimonious Imperialism which he loathed, that "one loves America, above all things, for her youth, her greenness, her plasticity, innocence, good intentions . . ."—even while he shuddered at her table manners, her vocalization, and the heavy dream of romantic materialism through which she stumbles, beating time with one hand for "Onward Christian Soldiers" and counting the gate-receipts with the other.

These letters are rich in their concise and accessible condensations of James's profounder convictions. He never side-stepped a challenge or a catechising. "Since you ask what I *do* mean by Religion," he answered Godkin in 1897 (apropos of *The Will to Believe*), "I can't forbear sending you a word to clear up that point. I mean by religion for a man *anything* that for *him* is a live hypothesis in that line, although it may be a dead one for anyone else." Four years later he declared himself "permanently incapable of believing the Christian scheme of vicarious salvation." Seven years later, he wrote that his "personal position" was "simple": "I have no living sense of commerce with God. I envy those who have, for I know the addition of such a sense would help me immensely. . . . Although I am so devoid of *Gottesbewußtsein* in the directer and stronger sense, yet there is *something in me* which *makes response* when I hear utterances made from that lead by others. . . . I am *sure* it is not old theistic habits and prejudices of infancy. Those are Christian; and I have grown so out of Christianity that entanglement therewith on the part of a mystical utterance has to be abstracted from and overcome, before I can listen." In the same year (1904) he filled in his answers to Professor Pratt's questionnaire upon the subject of religious belief, and these answers are reproduced in the Letters, wherefrom it may be learned that, for James, God meant "a combination of Ideality

and (final) efficacy." As to his being "a person": "He must be cognizant and responsive in some way." As to "the relation of God to mankind and to you personally," his answer was: "Uncertain." To the question, "Do you pray, and if so, why?" he replied: "I can't possibly pray—I feel foolish and artificial." Did he "believe in personal immortality?"—"Never keenly, but more strongly as I grow older." Did he "accept the Bible as *authority* in religious matters?"—"No. No. No. It is so human a book that I don't see how belief in the divine authority can survive the reading of it."

He died at sixty-eight, in the fulness of his uncommuted youth—for it is inconceivable that William James would ever have exhibited any spiritual feebleness or induration. He lived with an amazing fulness, pliancy, sensibility. That blend of honesty and flexibility which was so distinguishingly his is an uncommon apparition on the intellectual stage of America. His Scotch-Irish ancestry gave him something of his fusion of integrity and plasticity, his rich awareness of beauty, his boundless capacity for human response, the untameable sense of comedy which gleams and bubbles through the exuberant torrent of his discourse. He will abide among the greatest of his countrymen—with Thoreau and Lincoln and Whitman and Franklin and Emerson. For an encouraging many, he will stand always for the ideal of a challenging and uncorrupted intelligence, cleansed and wind-blown, constantly vibrant, drenched in the colors of human life, immeasurably responsive, bountiful, rewarding—a spirit "not too divinely alien to console."

LAWRENCE GILMAN.